

Marx's critique on capitalism set forth a revolutionary movement aimed at the termination of capitalism and the establishment of new global economic, political and social order in which the proletariat is the determinant voice and actor. In this critique of capital, Marx traces economic changes across time through a materialist investigation of history. He makes use of historical materialism to reassess history and to develop an economic theory about the actuality of the market system, not simply a speculative model of it.

However, the many ways in which Marx is interpreted have necessarily critiqued many of his assumptions and assertions. Theory should not be static. One of these voices is Emmanuel Wallerstein who in his book, *Historical Capitalism*, reassess the current economic, political and social situation against past economic moments. From this analysis, Wallerstein brings to light, what he believes is a significant error in thinking about the development of socialism: that it follows the same progressivist track of development as capitalism. For Wallerstein, this revelation challenges the image and creation of the proletariat as understood traditionally. Moving through history, Wallerstein highlights moments of incomplete proletarianization and the development of racism, sexism advancing a mode of understanding of history based in transition. Critical of both these views, Cedrik J. Robinson in his book, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, critiques the Marxist analysis on the development of capitalism, socialism and the proletariat. Tracing the roots of racism back to the Roman Empire and detailing the world (not eurocentrically, as Marx did, he argues) historical development of capitalism. He thus dispels Wallerstein's historization of racism and sexism as becoming institutionalized after the establishment of capitalism. Furthermore, he roots both capitalism and socialism in a racially exclusive Eurocentric understanding of history and being in the world which negates 'others' histories, cultures and modes of being. European hegemony, the universalization of its culture and way of being that allows it to maintain a position of power, is challenged by the alternative epistemes, cultures and histories experienced and affirmed throughout space and time. The black radical tradition, according to Robinson clearly and materially presents a radically distinct conception of being and, consequently, revolution—one that is not centered upon the Marxist construction of the proletariat but rather takes liberation as its vision and its subject, the black.

The proletariat is central to the Marxist critique of capitalism for he represents the revolutionary subject formed through the process of capitalist industrialization, urbanization and wage-slavery. This definition is in direct relation to the Marxist critique of capitalism: the commodification and acquisition of anything and everything, even of subjects. This founding principle of capitalism is also the grounding for one of its many contradictions. Through commodification and the establishment of commodity chains, capitalism is in constant search of lowering production costs, especially in regards to labor, to increase surplus value and production. However, the production of goods means nothing if they cannot be purchased due to extreme differences in wages and prices. Therefore capitalism enters into a paradox in which it requires low cost labor while at the same time requiring a consumer market. In response to this contradiction arose wage labor was invented. As defined by Wallerstein, the institutionalization of wage labor lead to the creation of "a group of persons available to the highest bidder" (22). The establishment of wage-labor is an integral aspect of the development of capitalism not only because it mediates a fundamental contradiction, ensures the availability of labor and thus the longevity of capitalism but also because it has lead to the development of the proletariat. Historical capitalism, as Wallerstein defines it, is the "widespread commodification of processes" that had previously functioned outside the market (15). The worker, whose labor was once self owned, finds himself commodified by capitalism as the system expands. He is proletarianized. Wallerstein, however, expands upon and challenges the Marxist conceptualization of the proletariat in relation to the embedded notion of progress within the capitalist critique.

'Full' proletarianization and the advent of the revolutionary proletariat vanguard are assumed consequences

of a progresivist understanding of capitalism and history. This assumption, as evidenced by Wallerstein, leads to a problematic reinscribing of the revolution/ary within the very framework through which capitalism was justified: progress. As the “centerpiece of the modern world,” the liberal notion of progress has supported both the global expansion of capitalism and the advance of socialist movements (Wallerstein 97). As Wallerstien points out,

“the Marxists embrace of an evolutionary model of progress has been an enormous trap, which socialists have begun to suspect only recently, as one element in the ideological crisis that has been part of the overall structural crisis of the capitalist world economy” (98).

The effects of Marxism’s progressivism within his critical project limit the radical potential of socialist revolution and society. “Up to now, the ‘proletarian revolution’ has been modeled, more or less, on the ‘bourgeois revolution,’” conflating change with progress and waiting for progress to arrive (Wallerstein 106). It is in this critique of Marxism and progressivism that Wallerstein begins to advance his understanding of the current political situation. The proletariat, according to Wallerstein’s stance against progressivism, is in immiseration. The destruction of community structures with the global expansion of capitalist development along with the codification of an oppressive notion of humanity are, for Wallerstien, signifiers of immiseration. Thus, the notion of progress central to capitalism has not had any material effect for the majority of peoples and in the majority of instances, ‘progress’ has served to mask an overall decline in human relations, economic equilibrium and political formation.

This critique on Marxist theory elucidates an embedded limitation that must be recognized and worked through in order to attain true progress. The root of this limitation, as understood by Wallerstein, is found in his use of progress to guide the emergence of resistance to capitalism. Wallerstein’s critique stems from a comparative reassessment of history from the present to the past. However, for Robinson and for those who identify themselves with the black radical tradition, the critique of capitalism and of Marxism necessarily needs to go deeper.

Robinson embarks upon a historical critique interrogating the very formation of Europe as an idea and as a materially dominating force. In doing so, he reveals the diversity of the various peoples of Europe and the extreme process of “self-colonization,” an effect that urbanization produced, collapsing all diversity in favor of the homogenous image and idea of Europe (or Christendom or the Roman Empire, depending on the historical moment). In terms of Europe’s social, political and economic foundations, Robinson turns to the concept of ‘barbarian,’ a deeply rooted mode of exclusion whose development have lead to the present. This concept, he affirms, was an essential category in both the Roman Empire and during the emergence of Europe. Dehumanized, othered, socially excluded: ‘barbarians’ and slave labor served as a “critical basis” of the production processes of Europe which lead to the establishment of capitalism (Robinson 11). The presence of and the active use of the concept of ‘barbarian’ before any notion of capitalism emerged, leads Robinson to state that,

“...from its beginnings, this European civilization, containing racial, tribal, linguistic and regional particularities was constructed on antagonistic differences” (10).

Furthermore, Marx’s analysis of the development of the proletariat also erases the very real and human differences among those whom he established as the proletariat: the English working class. “The English working class was never the singular social and historical entity suggested by the phrase,” says Robinson (42). Rather, modes of categorization (nationalities, skilled and unskilled labor, races) already present were exploited to divide the working class. Yet Marxism could not escape the many contradiction embedded within his European epistemic frame and instead is rooted in the same cultural formation as capitalism.

“Marxism, the dominant form that the critique of capitalism has assumed in Western thought, incorporated theoretical and ideological weaknesses that stemmed from the same social forces that provided the bases of capitalist development” (Robinson 10).

The limits of Marxism, therefore, are rooted in his understanding Europe-in-the-world; a history that orients, provides the foundations for his theoretical work and shapes his conception of the proletariat.

The failure to recognize the reality of Europe's development is not Robinson's only critique. Marxism has yet to confront slavery, Africa, the Third World and the black. The slave trade was relegated to the phase of capitalist development known as primitive accumulation. Although he noted the economic significance of slavery in the establishment of capitalism as a global system and, more precisely, in Europe's exponential growth as a global power, Marx did not address slavery as concerning subject, agents, peoples and cultures. This omission has significant implications for the heart of Marxist thought: the dialectic, and more precisely, the dialectic between capitalism and resistance, between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Marx assigns the enslavement of African peoples to the stage of primitive accumulation in his analysis of capital and its expansion. Robinson argues that while this categorization was not assigned or influenced by mal-intent, ignorance and blindness were definite components.

“... Marx had not realized fully that the cargoes of laborer also contained African cultures, critical mixes and admixtures of language and thought, of cosmology and metaphysics, of habits, beliefs and morality. These were the actual terms of their humanity...African labor brought the past with it, a past that had produced it and settled upon it the first elements of consciousness and comprehension” (121-122).

Culture must be understood as an expression of the ways in which a people understands their being in the world. Western European culture, as Robinson has already demonstrated, is rooted in an understanding of being-in-the-world predicated on an Other (barbarian, non-Christian, black, Indian etc) and it is in othering (thingifying a more appropriate term in the context of slavery) that Europe establishes its superiority, claiming its way of being in the world as the only way to be (as a subject) in the world. However, non-European cultures, like the cultures of the African peoples, pose a direct challenge Europe's claim of universality for they affirm a different mode of being. Robinson quoting Amilcar Cabral, leader of the liberation movement of Guinea-Bissou, further emphasizes the significance of culture.

“Imperialist development, by denying the historical development of the dominated people, necessarily also denies their cultural developments...imperialist domination, like all other foreign domination, for its own security, requires cultural oppression and the attempt at direct or indirect liquidation of the essential elements of the culture of the dominated people....[I]t is generally within the culture that we find the seeds of opposition” (122)

For it is in culture that the alternative modes and systems of being are preserved: within religions, languages, philosophies, traditions, the humanity of a culture is asserted. As Robinson notes, the English working class, epitomized by Marx as the quintessential example of resistance and consciousness is stripped of its uniquely revolutionary character when the history of Black radicalism is brought forth from the shadows (49). The proletariat as the revolutionary subject is negated by historical fact, but only is history itself is freed from Eurocentric categories (constraints) of thought (4). If history is read without the black voice, the black experience, African cultures or histories—if history is not examined critically through alternative epistemes, then the concept of the proletariat as developed by Marx is sustained, allowing the reproduction of racist, Eurocentric historical narratives even within resistance movements.

The violent dismissal of cultures and histories and peoples did not extinguish the humanity of those enslaved, nor did it destroy memory. It is in within the spheres of their cultures and their histories (and all that they encompass) that their humanity is not only preserved but asserted. This assertion is resistance

borne from a different consciousness of being in the world. Uncontainable within Western-European modes of thought, either Marxist or capitalist, the black radical tradition is rooted in this consciousness. Black radicalism draws upon an ever-present yet ever-negated history of struggle, a radically different tradition—necessarily interrelated with European struggles—but uniquely situated. Europe created a world view in which black people were a contradiction: inhuman human, dehumanized human. Despite these conditions, the history of black radicalism is incessant. This radicalism cannot be contained within a tradition Marxist framework. As Robinson states about black radicalism:

“It is not a variant of Western radicalism whose proponents happen to be Black. Rather, it is a specifically African response to an oppression emergent from the immediate determinants of European development in the modern era and framed by orders of human exploitation woven into the interstices of European social life from the inception of Western civilization” (73).

Black radicalism invokes a tradition of resistance formed within this uniquely historical, cultural and political perspective. Rooted in a particular experience, Black radicalism develops an alternative dialectic, more in tune to a truly materialist history: the dialectic of imperialism and liberation. The dialectic of ‘proletariat and bourgeoisie’ was obviated as insufficient by both black radicals and other third world radicals, giving rise to “...the dialectic of imperialism and liberation, the contradiction that compelled the appearance of resistance and revolution out of the condition of oppression—even from its ideology” (Robinson 166). This dialectic implies a form of radicalism incomprehensible within Marxism, for the revolutionary subject is not the proletariat, but a racialized nonhuman asserting her humanity. Based on the principle of assertion and creation, the Black radical tradition remains committed to a vision of liberation un-inscribable within the historical construction of the proletariat, a vision that goes beyond the universalized European way of being.

By reducing people from Africa and their descendants to mere bodies without histories or cultures, Marx categorically rejects the possibility for action, thought or humanity on behalf of those enslaved. Resistance assumes a glaring European face. The proletariat becomes the universal revolutionary subject, despite its particularity; eurocentrism has once again limited thought. Other forms of resistance previous to or parallel to European radicalism are either ignored or rendered insignificant by their racialized dehumanization, even escaping Marx, establishing an incomplete dialectic of resistance as between proletariat and master, assuming that resistance always and uniquely develops as a working class struggle against capitalist domination.. Wallerstein’s critique also remains captive within Western-European discourses of history and culture. He does not challenge the accuracy of Marx’s historical development and thus develops several historically inaccurate conclusions about capitalism. In terms of the historiography of racism, Wallerstein attributes the establishment of racial and gender categories to the process of solidifying capitalism as a global economic system, ex post-facto the emergence of capitalism. However his critique does not link racism with Western European culture, rendering it as equally uniformed as Marx’s. As Robinson states, the “Marxist doctrine of movement in dialectical collisions is not a hypothesis liable to be made more or less probable in by the evidence of facts, but a pattern uncovered by a non-empirical historical method, the validity which is not questioned” (43). Marx’s particular understanding of being in the world is informed by Western European categories of thought. Robinson affirms that racism and sexism are embedded in the collective consciousness of the West: they are part of European culture and infiltrate every social, political, intellectual and economic sphere. Thus Robinson’s critique of Marxism is based not on its progressivist tendencies but on its embedded epistemic limitations. Thus, a rewriting of history is required to arrive at a revolutionary subject that is not constrained within European categories of thought nor categorically eliminated by the very ‘alterity’ of the subject’s humanity. In his text, Robinson exemplifies that which he is calling for (although it can be said he calls by example): a history that centers around the ultimate other, a history that presupposes the humanity of the black person. For Wallerstein, Marx’s progressivist frame work was the trap that Marx fell into. For Robinson, both Wallerstein and Marx

fall into the trap of miscomprehension in respect to their reproduction of a universalized, constructed and particular (European) history and culture. The Marxist construction of a universalized proletariat is therefore unsubstantiated in its quest for liberation. Robinson derives from history a revolutionary subject based on a different episteme, culture and history, shaped and guided by experiences which travel across space, time and place: traditions, histories, a multiplicity of epistemes and songs transcending the body and the soul.

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